

Safety at Low Head Dams

A low head dam is a manmade structure spanning a river or stream channel from bank to bank in which water flows over the entire length of the top of the dam. Moderate to high flows over such dams create strong turbulent and recirculating currents at the base that push victims under water, and then pull them back to the face of the dam in a repeating cycle.

These dams typically range from a one to 15-foot drop. Because of their relatively small size and drop, low head dams may not always appear to be dangerous.

Recreate Safely

Low head dams are dangerous for swimming, boating, fishing and other water recreation. When recreating in a natural body of water, be aware of the distance from any low head dams. It is possible to be caught in a low head dam while moving upstream or downstream.

There are more than 150 low head dams cataloged in Indiana. Hoosiers boating, swimming and recreating in stream systems are encouraged to learn where low head dams are located, so they can be avoided. In many cases, low head dams are difficult to see from upstream, causing an unsuspecting person to go over the dam and placing them in a dangerous situation.

Always wear a personal flotation device (PFD) when recreating in a natural body of water. If recreating near water, bring ring buoys, boat cushion, or one-gallon milk jug half full of water tied to 50 feet of rope. Use any of these items to retrieve a person caught in a low head dam. When boating, kayaking or canoeing, portage around low head dams.

When Caught in a Low Head Dam

It is nearly impossible to escape the recirculating current of a low head dam without assistance. If caught in the boil of a low head dam, try to swim along the face of the dam towards the nearest bank.

If you see someone trapped in a low head dam, call 9-1-1 immediately. **Do not jump in to save the person.** Stand on the bank and shout encouragement to the individual until help arrives. The most effective and safest form of rescue is shore-assisted. Shore-assisted rescue will not put the rescuer at risk. Remember, more than 25 percent of dam-related deaths are the rescuers who do not succeed in saving the person drowning.

Know the Facts

- Indiana ranks 10th in the nation for people who have died in low head dams.
- Of all drownings in Indiana, more than 10 percent are dam-related.
- The average age of drowning victims in Indiana is 25.
- The age range of dam-related deaths is between 9 and 56 years of age.
- Watch the WFYI documentary *Over Under Gone — The Killer in Our Rivers*, online at <http://bit.ly/OverUnderGone>.